

## Dreaming "My Death"

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### Dreaming "My Death"

Somebody (who could be me) is running. They (who are many) are in pursuit. Somebody is running up what seems to be a steep incline, a hill of sorts. There is no other pathway. Yet somebody sees (too late, as always) that the pathway drops off instantly, where the hillside has been cut away to form a deep quarry. Unable in that instant to stop, or perhaps having already decided that they must not be allowed to close in, somebody leaps into the unknown. The drop is very high but the fall takes only a matter of seconds. Somebody (who could be me) impacts with the ground and, in that single moment, feels . . . difficult to put it into words . . . flesh torn and bones shattered, the realisation as the skull . . . no, unspeakable . . . and something else besides, like departure, or the rending of a soul . . . what else to call it? Death.

### Two Philosophies

For Martin Heidegger, death is not something that can be "experienced" as such. Death is meaningful only insofar as it marks the "end" toward which life or being-here-and-now (*Dasein*) is directed. This end signifies in any given moment only insofar as each individual is able to comprehend the possibility of *not being* that "my death" presents. Thus, death is characterised by "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*)—it may indeed be the very thing that allows us to apprehend ourselves in our individuality.

For Emmanuel Levinas, by contrast, the only death that we can access meaningfully is the death of the Other. If we are aware of our own mortality, and this defines us, then it is because we are deeply aware of the Other's death. We apprehend ourselves initially insofar as we *respond-to* an Other, and the death of this Other produces a rupture in the chain of responding, such that Levinas characterises death as the "non-response" from which individuals gain their profound understanding of death and their relation to it.

I have chosen to discuss these two philosophies of death because they are often taken at face value to be directly opposed to each other on the basis of *whose* death provides the key to self-definition: mine or the Other's. Yet I intend to discuss a dream (the account of which begins this paper) rather than to engage at length with one or another particular philosophy. For this reason, my account of the work of Heidegger and of Levinas is necessarily brief, and is far from comprehensive. I choose these philosophies of death not only because they will provide a useful framework for discussing this dream, but because I suggest the dream itself speaks directly to these philosophies, and it engages with the perceived opposition of these two philosophies to each other.

One of the reasons that Levinas and Heidegger are often assumed to be directly opposed is that they both proceed (in different directions) from the same fundamental premise: it is impossible to *experience* death. This idea that death cannot be experienced—it can only be *represented*—is a common enough philosophical tenet. Yet what I am interested in here, on the basis of this dream, is the possibility that we might be able to remove this premise which opposes “experience” to “death,” and still speculate on *whose* death after the manner of Heidegger and Levinas. In other words, I want to ask a question that I can only begin to answer here: is there some way of thinking of “my death” in terms of the Other’s death, yet *which is capable of being experienced as such*?

### **The Narrative Dreamscape**

The account with which I opened this paper is the record of a dream I had several years ago, written here as I imagine I might recollect it in analysis. As if to play the part of the analyst myself, I want to mention the way that the relations between terms contributes to the dream formation and the degree to which this formation seems to be narrative in its mode of representation. For example, the individual upon whom this dream centres itself—somebody (who could be me)—is being chased. The chase leads by chance, or so it seems, to the sheer drop into a quarry. Yet in the *formation* of a dream narrative, can anything that is thrown forward be the result of chance?

Sure, I’ve seen quarries before. I’ve lived most of my life near Ipswich, and I’ve seen an episode or two of *Doctor Who* or *Blakes 7* (the British love to shoot *sf* in old quarries). I suggest that the question of chance is not whether the quarry in the dream has any direct referent outside the dream. Instead, it is a question of the arbitrariness of *this* quarry. Of course, the chase must lead somewhere, and the fact that it leads to a quarry in this case is not incidental. Note that by virtue of the fact that the dream opens with a chase, there is from the outset a characterisation of the central individual as “quarry” (a word that is used to describe the object of a hunt). Thus, the dream formation takes the character of this individual (who could be me) and connects it inexorably to the destination that will be thrown forward—the only possible line of escape that the narrative will present.

The reader will notice that *narrativity* in the dream formation is not a state of cause and effect, or of actants and events (to use narratological terms), although the dream itself is narrative in form. A chase *leads* to a quarry, suggesting a progression of the events, and a possible causal connection, yet the “chase” already posits its own object: its “quarry.” Narrativity thus emerges only as a mode of representation (a way of making “sense,” as it were) of the relation between objects—the quarry *and* the quarry—that are present by virtue of an entirely different logic, which is contingent in the first instance upon a play on words.

### **The Character of Death**

What has continued to puzzle me about this dream is why I did not simply awake prior to the fatal moment, as I have heard most people do when they dream about their death. The answer may be tied to this term “quarry” again, at least insofar as a *synonymous term* is an “open mine.” In a sense, the open mine provides a perfect verbal counterpoint to the terms in which the chase was expressed—“they” are “closing in”—to which the opposite can be the “opening” of “mine.”

The instant in which the sheer drop opens out before the individual in this dream is the moment that the verbal play marks a shift toward accepting the subjective position *as an individual*. By this I mean that the dream narrative, which posited the individual only as the object (“quarry”) of the mass position (“they”) presents a cryptic choice: instead of *being* the object, project it out there, in front of you—of course, if you accept this, then you will open out before you that which is “mine.”

Why is this choice fatal for the individual? The dream does not form in a vacuum. I had become acquainted with Heidegger at this stage of my life, and knew that the only thing that could be said to be truly “mine” was “my death.” Yet, even then, I was suspicious of the character ascribed to this death by Heidegger. It seemed to me that death was not *only* a limit that we hold before ourselves as the inevitability of our own demise. In this dream, as I recollect, the subjective position was not entirely fixed, which is why I have recounted the subject of the dream as “somebody (who could be me)” —in the narrative of the dream, the inevitability of “my death” only emerges *after* (and as a consequence of) the choice to accept the shifting of the subject and object positions.

### **The Experience of Death**

So, how does this dream, its recollection, or my interpretation of it here, offer anything to the question of “my death”? After all, I have argued that the presentation of death in this case is the product of a particular dream formation: it is contingent; it is lexical; and it is possible that this dream directly *responded to the theory* of the “mineness” of death. Under these circumstances, it may seem that nothing about this death could be said to be truly mine except insofar as it responds to another, such is the social/cultural terrain upon which the dreams of individuals are mapped out.

Yet I suggest that there is a gap in this reasoning, which may very well be a gap in the psychoanalytical theory of dream interpretation on which it is based. Interpretation can explain the conditions under which death is presented in the dream, yet it will stumble over the fact that (at least in recollection) much of the death itself in this dream cannot be put into words, except to call it simply “death.” This is to suggest that what happens in the dream *after* the position of the individual has been negotiated and the character of inevitability has been ascribed to death is perhaps more fundamentally an *experience* of death, rather than a *presentation* of death to oneself.

The recollection of the moment of death becomes awkward because there is much about the moment of this death that is primarily bodily or corporeal. *Dasein* at this moment, in this dreamscape, encompasses the moment of death, which is presented only in terms of what the individual “feels.” As a result, the “*Stimmung*” (feeling or “attunement”) which characterises experience for Heidegger and Levinas (despite their other differences) is given here to death, not simply as a part of a general definition of death, but as a factor in determining that which is specific to death *here-and-now*.

Of course, I remain suspicious of characterising this death as “experience” in existential terms. What remains to be investigated is the extent to which we may call dreamscapes a legitimate sphere in which anything like experience can be said to inhere. In any case, I wonder what residues (to use the psychoanalytical term) might have conditioned the “feeling” of death within this dream. I suspect that the answer to this may be something

to do with the mechanism by which we take an Other's death (this "non-response") into ourselves, which I have described elsewhere as a bodily and cognitive process, wherein representation *and* corporeality are both posited as the outside of what psychoanalysts call the unconscious.

Yet this further investigation will have to be held over for another time. For now, I will conclude these observations with the thought that there remains a lot more that can be learned from our dreams—about ourselves as individuals; about our relations with the Other, which constitute us as responsible social beings; and, not least of all, about "my death," in the degree to which it is something that can be lived by an individual who is at the same time a responsible social being.